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Women University Presidents: Career Paths and Educational Backgrounds

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Academic Leadership Journal

During the past few decades, research and scholarly dialogue focused on the topic of academic careers has increased. Although academe is just one of numerous industries whose career systems might be studied, it is a large and growing sector (Baruch & Hall, 2004). And, according to Baruch and Hall (2004), "with the accelerated level of available knowledge and the pressing need to develop human capital, there is a growing need for research on careers in academe" (p. 237). Rubin (2004) wrote of the development, attraction, and retention of outstanding leaders as one of eight fundamental challenges in higher education today. Yet, little research exploring the development of existing university presidents has been published, and even less on the development of women leaders in academia. It is imperative that the backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions of women presidents be studied so that commonalities can be discovered. This will assist women interested in personal and career development, as well as the educators, administrators, and consultants who will be designing future leadership development interventions.

A few studies are helpful in understanding presidents' backgrounds. The Chronicle of Higher Education (2005) published an issue reporting university president perspectives. It was reported that over 46% of the women were previously provosts or chief academic officers (CAO) compared with 28.5% of the men. Presidents' positions before assuming their current posts (in order of frequency) included other presidencies, provost/CAO, nonacademic university VP, other academic posts, dean, and other. Nearly 84% had doctorates (Ph.D., Ed.D., etc.), 7.2% obtained professional degrees (J.D., M.D., Psy.D., etc.), and 5.2% held a variety of master's degrees. Nearly 57% had never held a tenured faculty appointment. Walton and McDade's (2001) women CAO sample had doctorate degrees, experience with faculty (including teaching and scholarship), and knowledge of curriculum development and evaluation. Women admitted that "degrees and scholarly pedigrees" earn them respect from their faculty constituency (p. 88). These women also felt that other administrative positions were valuable preparation for presidencies.

The topic of career paths (linear vs. non-linear) has been an ongoing topic of discussion. Some of the literature reported studies of women who generally had linear career paths as they rose through the ranks to become leaders (e.g., White, 2003). Walton (1996) found that the career paths of the U.S. women were traditional steps up the academic ladder. Yet, literature (e.g., Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Waring, 2003) has also reported that women leaders had informal or nonlinear paths. Women in these samples did not intentionally look for leadership positions and were sometimes even reluctant. Hartman (1999) concluded that there was no single formula or path for leadership.

Scholarly literature also addresses career path gender differences. Hojgaard (2002) found that women achieved their leadership positions via professional and middle management jobs, and that "a higher proportion of the male leaders start their top-leadership career from a broader range of jobs" (p. 25). Hennig and Jardim (1977) argued that "women see a career as personal growth, as self-fulfillment, as satisfaction, as making a contribution to others, as doing what one wants to do. While men indubitably want these things too, when they visualize a career they see it as a series of jobs, a progression of jobs, as a path leading upward with recognition and reward implied" (p. 14). Radin (1980) reported that

a woman's ability to self-educate was essential to her career development. And, Taylor and Conradie (1997) argued that the most enriching developmental experiences were women's own life experiences.

Purpose

The purpose of overall research study was to explore the "lived experiences" of women university presidents in developing (throughout their lives) the knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies required for successful leadership in higher education. The objective of this particular paper is to report qualitative research results focused on the career paths and educational backgrounds of these women presidents.

Sample and Methods

Research for this paper is based on in-depth two to three hour qualitative interviews with ten U.S. women. The invited women served as presidents or chancellors of public and private post-secondary educational institutions (eight research-focused, two teaching-focused). Eight of the women were Caucasian and two African American, while four were in their fifties and six in their sixties. The qualitative interviews were designed to gain deeper understanding and meaningfulness of their lifetime developmental experiences.

Interview questions were drafted based on an extensive review of the literature and other related instruments. Instrument items were open-ended probing questions designed to extract all types of information about the presidents' experiences and perceptions of becoming leaders. Questions were reviewed prior to the interviews by two experienced leadership researchers, and slight instrument adjustments were made based on their feedback.

A number of steps were utilized to analyze the interviews: 1) interviews were transcribed in full; 2) interviews were analyzed to categorize responses into specific sections; 3) related responses from all participants were combined into separate categorized documents; 4) transcriptions and analyses were reread to identify key ideas and phrases related to each category; 5) phrases or statements were grouped by topic and emerging primary themes were noted; 6) the presidents reviewed the themes/results and provide additional insight.

Results and Discussion

To understand the various influences in the university presidents' careers, the women were asked to describe their educational backgrounds. Five received bachelor degrees in education, four in math and science, and one in social science. They attended a variety of institutional types. All majored or would have majored (if the counseling or opportunities were different or better) in math or science. Seven presidents pursued masters degrees immediately (or within a year or so), two started within two to four years, and one took a longer break to bear and raise children. All but one (who went immediately into a Ph.D. program) received various types of masters degrees in similar areas as their bachelor degrees (philosophy, social work, special education, economics, secondary education, science), while one received a degree in education administration. There is wide variation (because of work opportunities and family decisions) regarding the timing of doctorate degree completion. Six presidents received doctorate degrees in education (four in higher education administration; two had other emphases) and 4 in non-educational areas. Four earned EdDs, five PhDs, and one remains a doctoral candidate.

Overall, half of the presidents as young adults chose education majors as undergraduates, and six obtained educational doctorate degrees. Although they obtained various degrees during their bachelor programs, all women expressed interest and passion in the math and science area and spoke of the joy they found in logic and rationality. However, many were not willing to pursue their interests at all costs. They wanted to graduate and made compromises when needed. Most of the women were wives and mothers during part of their educational preparation. None regretted these choices and decisions.

Job titles of the various positions the women occupied throughout their professional careers were extracted and compiled into Table 1. Four started out as K-12 school teachers, while four started their careers in various positions within higher education. Hence, eight of the ten president began their professional work careers in education (K-12, post-secondary). Other finding highlights include the following:

· 6 had academic career paths; 4 had non-academic paths (see Table 1 for examples)

· 1 had a traditional male career path (faculty member, chair, dean, academic vice president and/or provost, and president)

· 2 had department chair experience

· 1 was an academic school dean, 2 had other deanships, 3 were associate deans

· 3 were assistants/special assistants to presidents

· 6 were full-time assistant professors; 5 were associate professors; 6 were professors (2 were awarded the status without going through the ranks)

· 9 were college professors or instructors as their primary employment for a time

· 4 were major grant recipients for research laboratories and experimental research

Presidents came to their current posts from a variety of positions: five provosts, vice presidents or vice chancellors of academic affairs; two vice chancellors/presidents of administration and finance; one vice president of university relations; one government agency leadership position; and one university presidency. This sample is similar to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2005) data already presented; however, it differs in that 80% (instead of 55%) had vice president/chancellor posts immediately before their current positions. The samples are comparable with regard to educational backgrounds and tenured faculty appointments.

None of the ten women presidents had an official career path to become a university president. One claimed, “I did not plan to go into administration. It just happened.” Most stated that they began thinking about becoming a president when they were vice presidents. One stated, “I did not think about becoming a president until after I became a provost. I did not think about becoming a provost until I was far into a deanship. Eventually I thought, ‘I could do that!’” One president mentioned, “The best positions I have had, I’ve actually not sought out.” Three stated that they seemed to fall into new and more challenging positions.

Table 1. Job titles/positions before becoming university presidents

Title	No.	Title	No.
Accreditation Officer/Coordinator	2	Director of Graduate Programs	1
Adjunct College Instructor	3	Director of Institutional Research	1
Assistant Professor	6	Director of Office of Field Studies	1
Assistant VP for AA	1	Director of Outreach	1
Assistant VP for Community Partnerships	1	Director of Professional Development	1
Assistant VP for Finance	1	Education Coordinator	1
Associate Chair	3	Faculty Union Leader	1
Associate Dean, Academic School	1	Family Counselor	1
Associate Dean for AA	1	Full-time instructor	4
Associate Dean for Continuing Ed.	1	Instructional Developer	1
Associate Director of Continuing Ed.	1	Instructor of Special Programs	1
Associate in HE Opportunity	5	Interim/Acting President or Chancellor	2
Associate Professor	1	K-12 Classroom Teacher	4
Associate VP/VC of Budget and Finance	3	Manager of Budget/Planning	1
Board of Regents Admin./Consultant	1	Non-educational agency director	1
Budget Analyst	1	Principal	1
Business Officer (non-education)	1	Professor	6
Commission on H.E. Adminstration	2	Research Fellow	2
Consultant	1	Researcher, Lab	2
COO (educational setting)	2	Special Assistant/Assistant to the Pres.	3
Curriculum Development, Chair/Coordin.	1	Teaching Assistant	1
Dean, Academic School	1	Vice Provost	1
Dean, Undergraduate Programs	1	VP of Community Relations	1
Dean, Graduate School	1	VP of Government/Community Relations	1
		VP of Research	2

Department Chair Director of Community Leadership Program Director of Finance	1	VP/VC for Adminstration VP/VC for Finance VP/VC/Provost of AA	2 5

Conclusions

The educational backgrounds and career paths of the ten women university presidents reveal a history of desire and drive for continuous learning and development, as demonstrated by their histories of advanced degrees (master's and doctoral) and their interest, openness, and drive to take on new responsibilities, positions, and opportunities in a variety of areas. They enjoyed challenges and change because of the opportunities for ongoing personal and professional development and the chance it gave them to make a difference.

A major finding of this research is the value of informal or non-linear career paths for women. This research supports findings from other researchers (e.g., Hartman, 1999; Waring, 2003) that successful women leaders did not intentionally look for leadership positions, but instead worked hard in their current jobs and performed to the best of their abilities. None of the presidents expressed regret that they took this indirect path. All said that each position provided them with the opportunity to learn and develop essential knowledge and competencies that have been imperative for success. Yet, every woman took a different path. This research supports the notion that various career paths can lead to top leadership positions in academe. Some researchers argue that women should decide early and plan more direct career paths toward their intended leadership goals. However, it is clear that these women became the leaders they are today because of every differing career and life opportunity. In fact, the richness of their current perspectives and insights can be attributed to this variety of career and service choices and opportunities.

This paper offers important implications. Understanding the experiences and perceptions of these women provides insight into the types of activities, influences, and experiences that are beneficial for women to develop the needed knowledge, skills, and competencies required for effective leadership. This research can assist 1) individual women of all ages interested in personal and career development, and 2) educators, administrators, and consultants who will be designing future leadership development interventions.

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